KATE CHOPIN

1851–1904

Despite her conservative, aristocratic upbringing, Kate O'Flaherty Chopin became one of the most powerful and controversial writers of her time. In her stories, sketches, and novels, she not only captured the local color of Louisiana but also boldly explored the role of women in society.

Kate O'Flaherty was born in St. Louis, Missouri, the daughter of a wealthy businessman. When she was nineteen, she married Oscar Chopin, a Louisiana cotton trader. The couple settled in New Orleans, where they lived for ten years before moving to a plantation in rural northwestern Louisiana. In 1883 Chopin's husband died, leaving her to raise her six children on her own. Chopin carried on the work of the plantation alone for more than a year, using her knowledge of finance and developing skills as a businesswoman. However, in 1884, she yielded to her mother's urgings, sold most of her holdings, and returned to St. Louis with her children. Her mother's sudden death in 1885 left her in deep sorrow. It was at the suggestion of her family doctor, who was concerned about her emotional state, that Chopin began writing fiction. Chopin kept St. Louis as her home for the rest of her life, devoting much of her energy to writing.

Influenced by American Regionalists such as Sarah Orne Jewett and fascinated by the mixture of cultures in Louisiana, Chopin focused on capturing the essence of life in Louisiana in her writing. Like most of her other works, her first novel, *At Fault* (1890), was set in a small Louisiana town inhabited by Creoles, descendants of the original French and Spanish settlers, and Cajuns, descendants of French Canadian settlers. Through her vivid descriptions and use of dialect, Chopin captured the local color of the region. In her stories, published in *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *Acadie* (1897), she exhibited her deep understanding of the different attitudes and concerns of the Louisiana natives. Yet her charming portraits of Louisiana life often obscured the fact that she explored themes considered radical at the time: the nature of marriage, racial prejudice, and women's desire for social, economic, and political equality.

Her finest novel, *The Awakening* (1899), is a psychological account of a woman's search for independence and fulfillment. Because the novel explored the issue of infidelity, it aroused a storm of protest. The book was severely attacked by critics and eventually banned, and Chopin's reputation was badly damaged. As a result, Chopin's work was virtually ignored for several decades after her death. Today, however, she is widely respected for her intense understanding of female psychology and her ability to capture local color.

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

The Story of an Hour

Writers' Techniques

Irony. Irony is a contrast between what is stated and what is meant, or between what is expected to happen and what actually happens. A number of different types of irony are used in literature. Situational irony occurs when the actual result of an action or situation is quite different from the expected result. For example, in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," when you are told that Peyton Farquhar assents to the "dictum that all is fair in love and war," you are led to expect that he may become involved in some type of covert or deceptive activity. As it turns out, however, Farquhar himself is the one who is deceived, when he is tricked by a Federal scout who pretends to be a Confederate soldier. Dramatic irony occurs when readers perceive something that a character in a literary work does not know. For example, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* Romeo poisons himself after being told that his beloved Juliet is dead. Yet the audience is aware that in reality Juliet has only been pretending to be dead as part of an elaborate plan to be united with Romeo.

Focus

Imagine an instance in which you or someone you know receives a piece of news that has a powerful effect. Then imagine that the news turns out not to be true. Describe how the news and the discovery that the news was false would affect you.

Primary Source

In "The Story of an Hour," you will meet a married woman who longs for freedom and independence. In this story and others, Kate Chopin recognized that the perfect wife of her time was submissive to her husband in all matters, that "the lack of self-assertion" was a sign of "the perfection of womanliness." Yet Chopin, who never remarried after her husband's death, had another vision of the marriage relationship, which she described in her early story "A Point of Issue":

> [The couple decided] to be governed by no precedential methods. Marriage was to be a form, that while fixing legally their relation to each other, was in no wise to touch the individuality of either; that was to be preserved intact. Each was to remain a free integral of humanity, responsible to no dominating exactions of so-called marriage laws. And the element that was to make possible such a union was trust in each other's love, honor, courtesy, tempered by the reserving clause of readiness to meet the consequences of reciprocal liberty.

The Story of an Hour

Kate Chopin

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

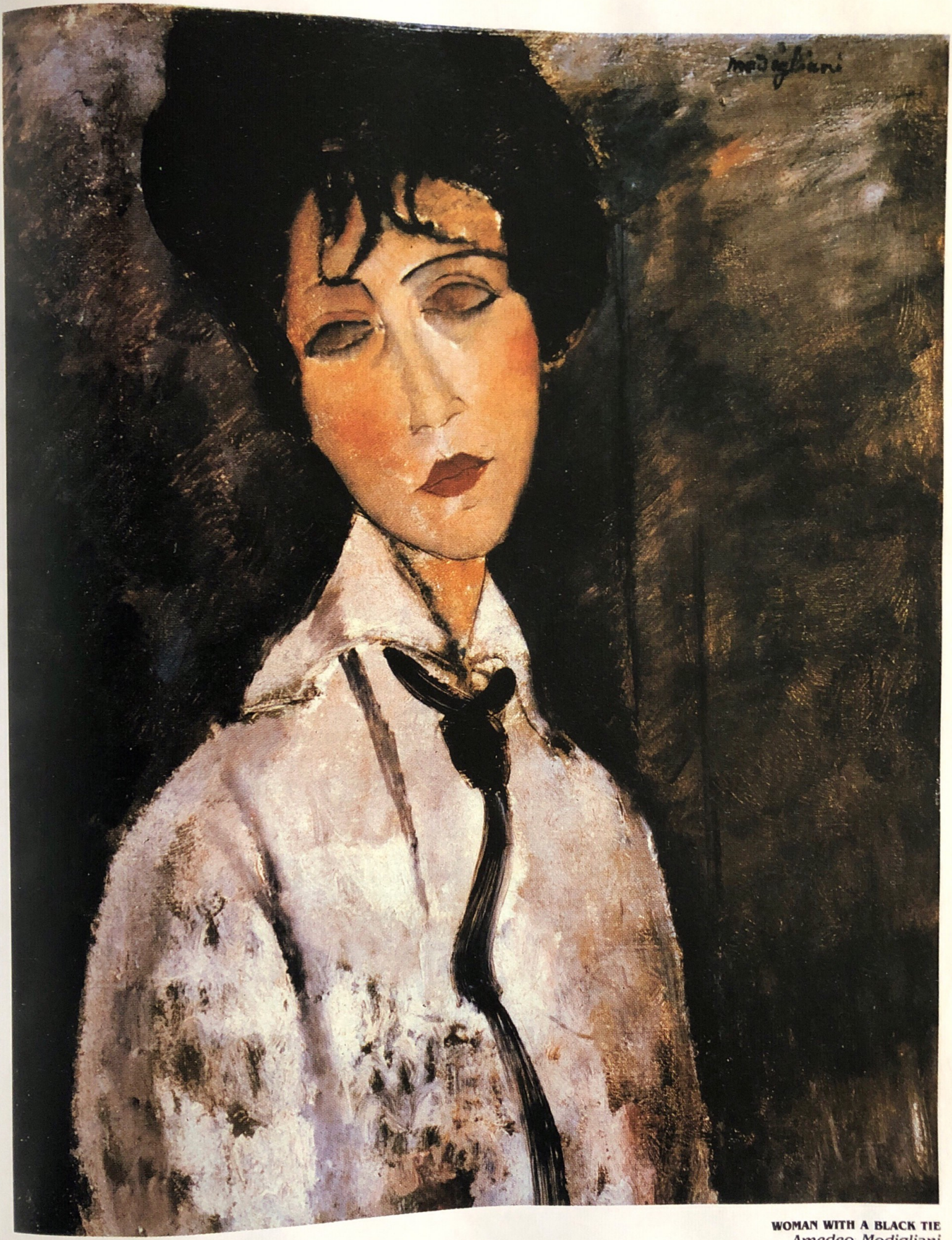
She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

When she abandoned herself, a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the cours-



WOMAN WITH A BLACK TIE
Amedeo Modigliani
Private Collection

ing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

"Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. "Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door."

"Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life[1] through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his gripsack[2] and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of accident, and did not know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards's quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.

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1. elixir of life (i lik′ sər) *n.*: An imaginary substance thought by medieval alchemists to prolong life indefinitely.

2. gripsack (grip′ sak) *n.*: A small bag for holding clothes.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What was your reaction to the ending of the story? Explain.
2. What is your opinion of Mrs. Mallard? Explain.
3. How might Mrs. Mallard's life have been different if the story were set in the late twentieth century?

Recalling

4. (a) How does Mrs. Mallard first react to the news of her husband's death? (b) How does her reaction change?
5. (a) Who opens the front door toward the end of the story? (b) How does Mrs. Mallard react when she sees him?

Interpreting

6. At the beginning of the story, when Chopin states that Mrs. Mallard "was afflicted with a heart trouble," she seems to be referring to a medical problem. Considering Mrs. Mallard's response to her husband's death, what other meaning do you think this statement might have?
7. How do the details of the scene outside Mrs. Mallard's room foreshadow the feelings that gradually sweep over Mrs. Mallard as she sits in her armchair?
8. What has Mrs. Mallard apparently resented about her marriage?
9. Why do you think Chopin chooses to reveal little about Mrs. Mallard's personality aside from her feelings concerning her marriage, her husband, and her independence?
10. What do you think is the actual reason for Mrs. Mallard's death?
11. What do you think is the significance of the story's title?

Applying

12. Mrs. Mallard realizes, "There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself." Do you think that it is important for people to live for themselves? Explain your answer.

Analyzing Literature

Recognizing Irony

Irony is a contrast between what is stated and what is meant, or between what is expected to happen and what actually happens. Situational irony and dramatic irony are two of the types of irony used in literature. An example of situational irony occurs in "The Story of an Hour," when, after you have been led to believe that Mrs. Mallard is deeply disturbed by the news of her husband's death, she is actually overcome by a sense of joy.

1. Why is Mrs. Mallard's sudden death also an example of situational irony?
2. Why is the diagnosis of the cause of Mrs. Mallard's death an example of dramatic irony?

Critical Thinking and Reading

Recognizing Details of Irony

A writer creates situational irony by including details that create certain expectations. For example, in "The Story of an Hour," Chopin leads you to believe that Mrs. Mallard has been upset by the news of her husband's death by mentioning that Josephine and Richards took great care to break the news to her as gently as possible.

Find two details that help create the situational irony of Mrs. Mallard's death.

Thinking and Writing

Writing About Irony

Write an essay in which you discuss the role of irony in "The Story of an Hour." Reread the story focusing on Chopin's use of irony. Develop a thesis statement. When you write your essay, use evidence from the story to support your thesis. When you revise your essay, make sure you have not included any unnecessary information.

Learning Options

1. **Writing.** What might Mrs. Mallard have made of her life if her husband had not returned? Imagine that the story ends with Mrs. Mallard descending the stairs with her sister. Revisit the widow ten years later. Have the years fulfilled their promise? Does Mrs. Mallard still wish for a long life? In a paragraph or two, describe Mrs. Mallard's life and thoughts.
2. **Multicultural Activity.** "The Story of an Hour" offers a glimpse of what life was like for American women in the late 1800's. What is life like for women around the world today? Pick a culture or country that interests you and prepare a brief oral presentation on women's roles there. How do the roles of women in that country or culture compare with those of women in the United States?